



Vail Preservation Society

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The Esmond Train Wreck

Daylight revealed a twisted tangle of still burning wreckage. Newspaper accounts estimated up to 22 fatalities. Authorities were fearful that an exact count was not possible due to the intensity of the fire. Final reports listed 14 dead, seven badly injured who were sent to the hospital, and twenty more injured in the crash. McGrath's 11 year old son was seen wandering among the wreckage searching for his father.

In Vail it was not quite 4:00 a.m. on a cold January morning in 1903 in Vail, Arizona. Alma and Florence Harris usually stayed under their warm quilts until at least 4:30. The cow would wait a little longer for milking and the rooster was not nearly ready to crow. Something drew them out to the front porch of their home near the Pantano wash that morning. Expecting to see a clear, crisp sky filled with stars they were surprised to see the western horizon blazing orange like a vermillion brushstroke across the sky. Something terrible must have happened. As he did every day Alma hitched up his team to the lumbering ore wagon he drove to Helvetia to transport copper ore back to Vail to be shipped by rail for processing. As he passed by the Vail Station on his way to Helvetia, he could see Station Master Harry Man and E.F. Clough, Vail's new night operator, talking in earnest. Not wanting to interrupt their earnest discussion, Alma kept heading south on Vail Road towards Helvetia mine. He would find out more when he returned with his load of ore.

The worst train wreck in Arizona history occurred in the early morning hours of January 28, 1903; about five miles west of Vail near Esmond Station. The eastbound Crescent City Express freight with Engineer Rob Wilkey at the throttle met the westbound Sunset Limited, with Jack Bruce in the engineer's seat. Bruce had brought the very first train into Tucson in 1880. The collision ended in a horrific tangle of metal, hot fuel oil, flesh and fire. Just minutes before the impact a chain of events that would end in a wall of flame was set in motion when the Sunset Limited, already two hours behind schedule, pulled into the Vail Station.



Railroad communications along the Main Line, that held two way train traffic, followed specific, defined procedures designed for safety. Messages and orders were typed or written on onion skin paper, thin enough to see through, in duplicate. These messages were called "a flimsy". The paper was wedged in a ring of willow wood. Flimsies were pulled out by the conductor if the train was on a slow pass through. If it was a stop for the train, the orders were read by the conductor, then a reread by the station operator to ensure they were correctly understood. Vail Station night operator E.F. Clough had two separate messages for the Sunset Limited that night. The first instructed the conductor that they would meet an

oncoming train at Wilmot station (west of Esmond); the second message instructed the train to pull onto a siding track at Esmond Station to permit the eastbound train to pass. The conductor never received the second order. Were procedures not followed, or was the second message never handed off? No one will ever know for sure.

Blame was immediately assigned to Vail's night operator Clough who disappeared the next day after making it known that the blame was the conductor's and not his. Clough was never heard of again. The Sunset Limited conductor, G.W. Parker, maintained that he was presented with only one order, not two.



At about 2:50 a.m. the engines hit head on. A Pullman car attached to the end of the Crescent City Express had three people on board, a Porter, Dr. Norton, the first veterinarian for the Arizona/New Mexico Territory and his five year old son. The veterinarian was on his way to Douglas to inspect cattle being brought into the country from Mexico for hoof and mouth disease. He often brought his young son along with him on official travels around the Territory. The three on board the Pullman car felt the impact, but had no idea of the enormity of what had happened. The Pullman was uncoupled from the burning train. Because of the downhill grade, the car began

rolling back towards Tucson. It was dark, the swaying of the car was dizzying as it rolled backwards at breakneck speed. With no way to control the car, the terrified passengers' wild ride did not stop until the Pullman reached the Tucson station 15 miles away.

Both engineers were killed, along with George McGrath, fireman on the Sunset Limited, who was to be married on February 1st. George's fiancé had asked him not to please not make this run because of a premonition and dream he had had. Years later the five year old son of the Territorial Veterinarian, Dr. Norton, would share the experience with his family, observing that he had never seen anyone turn as white with fear as the Porter on board the Pullman car that night. And, Vera Harris Duncan would share the story passed down for over 100 years through her family about how the night the horizon to the west of Vail glowed orange through the night from the burning wreckage.



Brakeman Lees from the Crescent City Express, after checking on passengers and crew was sent running through the darkness to Vail to telegraph for help.

Initial reports held the conductor, G.W. Parker, partially responsible. Later coroner's juries found Clough at fault. Clough may have realized the second order may not have been received because he wired Tucson, soon after the train left Vail, but it was too late. About five minutes later Clough again wired from Vail Station that, "There was a large sheet of flame ahead on the track." By early afternoon a temporary track had been built to bypass the accident so that trains could continue on schedule.



Today little evidence of that fateful January 1903 night remains. A new layer of history is being built by another generation. The location where the accident occurred are busy places of business; Fry's Grocery Store, Pyramid Credit Union and Leber Dentistry Office. The adobe Esmond Section House remains the only witness to that terrible night. Plans call for it to someday be part of a regional park interpreting our rich railroad heritage and providing needed recreational facilities for the greater Vail community.

I'll Meet You In The Cornfield Southern Arizona's Tragic Train Wreck of 1903. William D. Kalt, III. Winter 2004 Arizona History Journal

Vera (Harris) Duncan. Interview. J J Lamb

Dusenberry, Kate. Interview. J J Lamb

Photo 1 Arizona Historical Society #3055

Photo 2 Union Pacific Railroad Museum #X5520

Photo 3 Arizona Historical Society #24859

Photo 4 Vail Preservation Society, Florence and Alma Harris

Photo 5 Vail Preservation Society, Lundquist Collection, Esmond Station in 1912

J.J. Lamb, Vail Preservation Society